War criminal Rumsfeld dies, but his militarist legacy lives on

Bill Van Auken
1 July 2021

Donald Rumsfeld, the secretary of defense under George W. Bush who was a principal architect of the criminal US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, has died at his ranch in New Mexico "surrounded by his family," according to an announcement released late Wednesday.

That Rumsfeld reached the age of 88 without ever being tried as a war criminal, much less being locked up for his crimes, is testament to a breakdown of international law under the relentless assault of American militarism. It is also a product of the complicity of every institution of the US establishment, its two major parties, its corporations, media and academia in the crimes of mass murder and torture, along with the assault on basic democratic rights, with which Rumsfeld's name will always be synonymous.

These crimes, widely interpreted as a loathsome aberration when he was in office, have since become fully normalized under both Democratic and Republican administrations.

Rumsfeld was a man of the state, beginning his career as three-term congressman and then joining the Nixon administration as director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, an agency created as part of President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society program. He was hired for the express purpose of gutting its anti-poverty programs. He then assumed other positions, including counselor to the president and US ambassador to NATO. Nixon was recorded on his White House tapes as describing Rumsfeld as "a ruthless little bastard," no doubt a term of high praise coming from him.

After the forced resignation of Nixon, Rumsfeld headed the transition of Gerald Ford to the White House, subsequently becoming his chief of staff and then serving for little more than a year as secretary of defense, during which he worked to undermine negotiations with the Soviet Union on nuclear arms reduction and championed the buildup of new weapons systems such as cruise missiles and the B-1 bomber. He also oversaw the replacement of military conscription with an all-volunteer armed forces, a measure taken to wall off the military from the kinds of popular pressures that fatally undermined the US war in Vietnam.

Before joining the Bush administration, once again as secretary of defense, Rumsfeld made a fortune as an executive of several corporations and was a member of the neo-conservative think tank Project for a New American Century (PNAC). In the decade between the first Persian Gulf War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the PNAC advanced the perspective that, in the wake of the Soviet Union's dissolution, US imperialism could secure its interests through the unfettered use of military force. It lobbied for military intervention and regime change in Iraq in order to seize its oil wealth, secure US hegemony over the Gulf region and assure "a global security order that is uniquely friendly to American principles and prosperity."

Together with Rumsfeld, nine other signatories of the PNAC's founding statement joined the George W. Bush administration, including Vice President Dick Cheney, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and other senior Pentagon officials.

The September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon provided the pretext for carrying out wars for regime change in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and Rumsfeld served as both a chief advocate for these wars and their senior strategist.

Rumsfeld was one of the most prominent promoters of the lies about "weapons of mass destruction"—"we know where they are," he told the media—and non-existent ties between the secular Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, about which he claimed there was "bulletproof" evidence.

These lies in service of war were amplified by the media, with the *New York Times*, the voice of the Democratic Party establishment, in the lead. During this period, Rumsfeld was lionized by the press, with his face plastered on magazine covers and his platitudes about transforming the military and "unknown unknowns" treated as genius. The *US News & World Report* noted during this period that Rumsfeld "routinely has the press corps doubled over in fits of laughter." What the media found funny revealed a great deal about the disintegration of democratic sentiments within the US ruling establishment.

The wars with which Rumsfeld is identified were wars of aggression, the principal offense charged against the surviving leadership of Germany's Nazi regime at Nuremberg, from which all the other horrific crimes of the Third Reich flowed.

The human cost of these wars is staggering. According to Brown University's Cost of War Project, the number killed outright in the US "war on terror" in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Pakistan and Yemen is approximately 800,000, while "indirect deaths" resulting from the destruction of infrastructure, the decimation of health care and mass starvation may exceed 3.1 million. Fully 37 million people have been forced to flee their homes during the two decades of unending US imperialist war.

Indifferent to this mass slaughter, Rumsfeld was equally unconcerned about the lives of US soldiers sent into these dirty colonial-style wars. When US National Guard members

© World Socialist Web Site

approached him in Kuwait asking for help because they were inadequately supplied and their military vehicles were vulnerable to rocket-propelled grenades and roadside bombs, Rumsfeld delivered one of his pretentious banalities, declaring, “You go to war with the army you have, not the army you might want or wish to have at a later time.”

More than 7,000 US troops have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, with hundreds of thousands returning with grievous physical and mental wounds. As of 2018, 1.7 million veterans had reported a disability stemming from their deployment.

In addition to mass slaughter, Rumsfeld was intimately involved in the crimes of disappearances, extraordinary rendition, and torture. He personally supervised the creation of the infamous prison camp at Guantanamo and the use there and at other sites, including the Bagram base in Afghanistan, of so-called “enhanced interrogation techniques”—i.e., torture.

In January 2002, Rumsfeld issued a memo declaring that the war on terror “renders obsolete Geneva’s strict limitations on questioning enemy prisoners.” The memo called the Geneva Conventions’ rules for the treatment of prisoners “quaint.” When the photographs of US torture and sexual abuse of prisoners at Iraq’s Abu Ghraib prison surfaced in 2004, the main concern within the Pentagon and the White House was how the military failed to keep them secret.

Rumsfeld was forced to resign as secretary of defense in 2006 following sharp criticism from within the US military’s uniformed command and in the face of growing popular hostility to the war, which led to the Republicans losing control of both the House and the Senate.

For their part, the generals wanted to continue the wars under a more palatable civilian leadership. As for the Democrats, they not only failed to stop the wars, but voted funding for the “surge” in Iraq that led to another escalation of the bloodbath.

In 2011, when Rumsfeld was promoting his memoirs titled *Known and Unknown*, he told an interviewer: “For all the criticism of President Bush and the people working around him for the things he put in place—the Patriot Act, the Guantanamo Bay [prison] and various things, military commissions. ... The fact is, they’re still there. Why are they still there? They’re there, because they make sense in the 21st century. They’re needed. And the new administration has not been able to figure out a better way to do it.”

Indeed, under Obama, US military operations continued in Iraq, were massively escalated in Afghanistan and extended into disastrous wars for regime change in Libya and Syria. The dirty war tactics elaborated under Bush were expanded into a drone missile assassination program across the globe, while the wholesale spying upon the people of the United States and the world only intensified.

Today, the prison camp at Guantanamo remains open. The war in Iraq that Rumsfeld assured the media would last no more than five months continues, with the Biden administration ordering airstrikes against targets on both sides of the Iraq–Syria border this week.

It is this continuity of imperialist policy that explains the attempt to whitewash Rumsfeld’s criminal legacy. Speaking for the Biden administration, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin praised Rumsfeld’s “remarkable career” along with his “boundless energy, probing intellect and abiding commitment to serve his country.”

The Associated Press obituary described him as “ambitious, witty, energetic, engaging and capable of great personal warmth,” lamenting that his “reputation as a skilled bureaucrat and visionary of a modern U.S. military was unraveled by the long and costly Iraq war.”

What contemptible nonsense! One might as well say that Hitler’s reputation as a skilled military strategist was “unraveled by the long and costly” war against the Soviet Union.

Rumsfeld’s “vision” for the military was that smaller ground forces backed by overwhelming air power and precision-guided munitions could subjugate entire populations to US imperialist interests. Instead, in both Iraq and Afghanistan, these tactics resulted in mass murder, the destruction of entire societies and the eruption of popular opposition.

As for American imperialism’s efforts to utilize military force to conquer the world, the wars with which Rumsfeld is associated have resulted in one debacle after the next. As the WSWS anticipated at the time of the 2003 invasion of Iraq:

> Whatever the outcome of the initial stages of the conflict that has begun, American imperialism has a rendezvous with disaster. It cannot conquer the world. It cannot reimpose colonial shackles upon the masses of the Middle East. It will not find through the medium of war a viable solution to its internal maladies. Rather, the unforeseen difficulties and mounting resistance engendered by war will intensify all of the internal contradictions of American society.

Far from being deterred by the debacles associated with Rumsfeld in Iraq and Afghanistan, however, the US ruling class is only preparing a far more dangerous eruption of American militarism. Its turn toward “great power” conflict, particularly against China, threatens to unleash a war of world catastrophic consequences. This poses the urgency of building a new socialist and internationalist leadership to unite the working class against imperialist war and its source, the capitalist system.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site